

## Seeking the Latent: On Liz Magor's *Subject to Change*

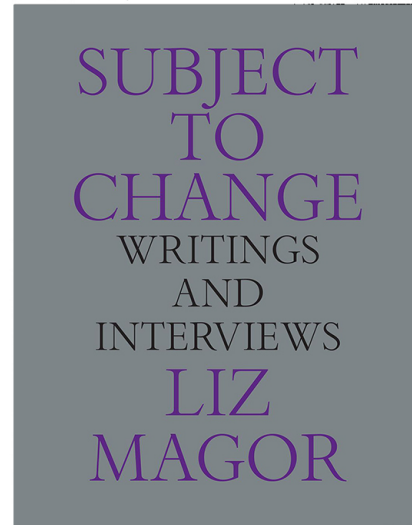
*Subject to Change: Writings and Interviews* by Liz Magor was published by Concordia University Press in 2022.

In her eponymous text on the sculpture *Buckle* (2016), Magor avoids explaining what the work is “about” and instead talks the reader through her process of working with these two somewhat pathetic, chronically serialized items – a plush cat and a soggy box – in pursuit of their sculptural coupling. “I’m more likely to launch into an account of the formation of the work – what the materials are and how they behave,” writes Magor. “In the case of *Buckle*, I’m thinking of wet corrugated cardboard... how water affects the paper... I can also recall the appeal of stuffed toy animals.”<sup>1</sup> Like many of the materials Magor chooses to work with, “the wet box and the unwanted toy are just two members of a vast league of losers... manufactured forms which find themselves either past their prime or unrealized in their potential.”<sup>2</sup> Magor uses physical elements to highlight this dejected/rejected quality she seeks in objects, an essence that creates in her a desire to facilitate circumstances in which these sad things might reimagine themselves through sculptural form.

A self-described materialist, Magor functions within an object-oriented ontology, questioning, repositioning, and replicating objects while honouring their independence. Her artistic process is stimulated dually by her intrigue in the quotidian and her belief in an eternal exchange between herself and the things that surround her. This drive is coupled with a certain intuitive sense that allows her to see the unseen potential in objects. Magor subjects objects to change until she finds the dynamism she is looking for.

*Subject to Change*, Magor’s 2022 publication, compiles many texts in which she touches upon her work without seeking to explicate. Part of Concordia University Press’ Text/Context series, this book focuses on the genre-defiant topic of “artist writing,” which looks at both what and how artists write. Focusing on a categorization in continual flux, the book includes a vulnerable range from Magor’s longstanding writing practice; artist statements, unpublished texts, and notes in the margins of installation instructions reside next to catalogue essays, interviews, and published writings on the work of peers. Though varied in format, her writing maintains a candid tone. In compiling these texts for publication, Magor reflects on her “consistent resistance to footnotes,” which she attributes to her overall “respect for the authority of the thing” coupled with her desire for her work – both sculptural and written – to be able to stand on its own.<sup>3</sup> Like Magor’s studio practice, her writing process starts with the object. “Buckle” is just one example of her straightforward approach to writing about her work, which sets out to highlight elemental focal points such as the toy’s size or the box’s texture rather than explain the various process-based decisions that

Cover of *Subject to Change: Writings and Interviews* (Montréal: Concordia University Press, 2022).



<sup>1</sup> Liz Magor, “Buckle,” *Subject to Change: Writings and Interviews* (Montréal: Concordia University Press, 2022), 340. Originally written in October 2019 for Frac (Fonds régional d’art contemporain) Île-de-France to accompany the 2016 work *Buckle*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Liz Magor, “Author’s Note,” xii.

informed the work. This descriptive approach fosters a heuristic atmosphere for her readers/viewers: she strips things down, thoughtfully repositions them, then leaves the rest to the witness.

This centring of both Magor's and the viewer's subjectivity opens to other questions in which one might seek answers in the artist's writings. In Magor's case, however, her studio and writing practices are eternally dialectical and satisfyingly/unsatisfyingly non-conclusive. While the publication is packed with questions, its title alludes to a few which seem to be at the heart of Magor's practice: How does the artist (qua subject) change? How does the subject effect change in objects, and how are they changed by them in turn? How do these objects then subject change in viewers?

### Subjects changing objects

Over the years, Magor's longstanding studio practice has been a tool for self-location. In a conversation with Lesley Johnstone, first published in the exhibition catalogue for a retrospective at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in 2016, Magor speaks about the ways her more than forty-year-long studio practice was born out of a need to situate herself both physically and psychologically. Originally born in Winnipeg, Magor moved to Vancouver when she was a child, leaving family scattered across the country. Magor cites both the physical distance of many of her relatives during her childhood and the arrival of second-wave feminism during her early adulthood as two factors for her "lack of grounding" early in her career.<sup>4</sup> "I began working as a means of self-location and continue to work that way," Magor explains.<sup>5</sup> Her artistic practice, which began as a way to grapple with these untethered feelings, becomes a larger methodology which actively takes into consideration the constant exchange between herself and the world around her.

A practicing artist since the early 1970s, Magor's work often takes the form of sculpture, photography, and installation. While her work addresses many themes – from historical events, survivalist culture, and hibernation, to the "coolness" factor of cigarettes – she maintains a fascination with subject/object dynamics. Magor finds stability in capturing, creating, and replicating moments in the life of both the animate and the inanimate, most often blurring the boundaries between the two, and thereby challenging their relationships to power. Through casting, Magor equalizes the power dynamics among objects that would otherwise be categorically distinct, "leveling disparate things [...] by making them one object."<sup>6</sup> Maintaining a near-daily studio routine, Magor continually returns to objects as a tool for grappling with the chaos of our constantly changing world: a means to slow down, digest, and take time to question and reflect on our relationality. As she writes in her artist statement to accompany a past folio in *The Capilano Review*:

As a result of working as a sculptor for many years I now consider position and status when I look at objects in the world... I work with the understanding that inanimate

Liz Magor, *Buckle*, 2016, polymerized gypsum, 250 × 109 × 18 cm. Photo by Pavel Dousek. Collection of FRAC Ile de France, courtesy of Marcelle Alix, Paris.



Liz Magor, *The Most She Weighed / The Least She Weighed*, 1982, lead, aluminum, 38 × 77 × 38 cm / 31 × 62 × 31 cm. Photo by Richard-Max Tremblay. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.



<sup>4</sup> Lesley Johnstone, "A Conversation with Liz Magor," 306. Originally published in *Liz Magor*, the catalogue for a retrospective exhibition at Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal which ran from June 22–September 5, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>6</sup> Liz Magor, "About Blankets; Kings and Queens," *Subject to Change*, 268.

Liz Magor, *One Bedroom Apartment* (installation view), 1996–ongoing, polyester resin, contents of a one-bedroom apartment, dimensions variable. From the exhibition *Storage Facilities*, Doris McCarthy Gallery, Toronto, 2009. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.



objects constitute human subjects by instigating affect, as they proceed to threaten, please, facilitate, or damage us. In the studio, I might rearrange the relationship between things in order to increase their power, or I make adjustments to restore their depleted importance. I always assume that material is co-operative, and process is the way to reach and understand the latent intelligence of things.<sup>7</sup>

Through her continued interest in redirecting the typical trajectory of objects, Magor opens herself and her viewers up to new ways of seeking and receiving, placing value on our own permeability.

### A subject to change

Counter to certain art-world trends which relentlessly seek to analyze and theorize in the pursuit of self-reflexivity, Magor does not attempt to didactically explain her work through her writing. Instead, she starts from what she knows and writes through the shifts that occur during her process. “I often undertake the writing during or just after I’ve made a work, not with a plan to correct or make the art more understandable but to try to see what I really want, as opposed to what I think I want,” Magor explains, before going on to note how in writing she is able to pose questions, then allow her studio practice to take over the search for answers.<sup>8</sup> The dialogue between her studio and written practices has shifted over her career but has always functioned as a tool for grappling with the slipperiness between artistic intention and reception. She notes: “[A]s a young artist I used writing as a way to stop the confusion and nail things down. As an older artist I see the folly of such control and I use writing as a way to accept it.”<sup>9</sup>

This shift in Magor’s use of writing can be traced through her immediate and subsequent textual processing of the response to *Field Work* in the early 1990s. In the late 1980s, Magor created

<sup>7</sup> Liz Magor, “Statement for *The Capilano Review*,” 290. Originally published in the fortieth anniversary issue of *The Capilano Review*, Issue 3.17 (Spring 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Liz Magor, “Author’s Note,” xi.

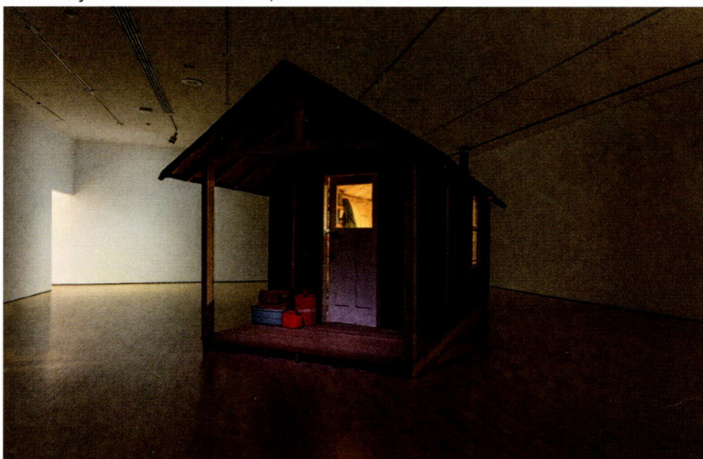
<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

a work which revisited a series of photographs she had taken two decades prior of some friends, all white, in various locations across Canada, wearing “hippie garb” and using tipis and canoes under the guise of the “back to the land” mentality which prevailed in the countercultural movements of the 1960s and ’70s. Magor resituated these photographs with titles taken from a book by the colonial photographer Edward Curtis, resulting in, as Philip Monk describes it in the book’s introduction, an intended “allying [of] Curtis, her friends, and herself in a critique of their collective romanticizing fiction of the past.”<sup>10</sup> When the reworked series was exhibited in 1989 in the Canadian Biennial of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada, there followed a critique of the work as cultural appropriation. In the wake of this call-out, Magor used writing as a way to grapple with the impact this work had had beyond her ironic intentions.

Magor’s processing can be seen throughout *Subject to Change* in the texts which chronologically trace her career from the first time she began “[w]riting in service to understanding the studio work,” up until the book’s publication.<sup>11</sup> “Home and Native Land,” Magor’s first written public response, candidly lays out her approach to the work and the (un)learning she subsequently embarked on. In many of the interviews and texts that follow this statement, Magor discloses her process of incrementally resituating herself as a settler subject and artist who benefits from Canada’s colonial reality.

Made uniquely clear through the format of this inter-genre book is the ongoing reality of a subject in the process of change. Insight is gained through instances of continual learning rather than retroactive conclusions. In the way Magor’s writing practice exists in a dialectical relationship with her studio practice, *Subject to Change* serves an akin function with her artistic oeuvre. These texts do not retrospectively assert an overarching narrative on her work, but rather place her writing in dialogue with her public projects to create a new space for discourse. Locating her and her work by writing alongside it.

Liz Magor, *Messenger* (installation view), 1996–2002, wood, plaster, textile, found objects, 305 x 305 x 427 cm. From the exhibition *Habitude*, Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2016. Photo by Richard-Max Tremblay. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.



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Philip Monk, “Introduction: Worrying the World of Things,” xxii.

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Liz Magor, “Author’s Note,” xi.

## Objects changing subjects

*Cupped* is a sculpture which infuses the visceral qualities of worn leather gloves to “perform a service . . . in continual readiness, to contain the effect of a nervous habit.”<sup>12</sup> In her installation instructions, Magor explains that one must light a cigarette and ash it into the palm of the casted gloves before putting it out and placing it on the thumb. Before the work has even met the public’s eye, *Cupped* has already implicated the art handler in the work through the act of lighting – and maybe even taking a drag of – the cigarette, and then ashing it.

So much of Magor’s practice is centred around these cyclical methods of effecting change in objects to effect change, in turn, in subjects. Her practice, though materially and thematically diverse across her career, remains grounded in this continual exploration – one that also plays out in the dynamic between her writing and studio practices and their mutual questioning of each other. Magor puts a lot of weight on the materiality of things, but her writing reveals her investment in making space for dialectics: posing questions in one medium to pick up in another.

Magor sets the viewer the task of seeking these answers alongside her. In viewing and reading her work, we get involved with the dejected/rejected, and invested in the overlooked “losers,” all the while losing track of what we were perhaps seeking at the start. Both her sculptural work and her writing style catalyze a chase without presenting any finish line; this publication likewise wraps nothing up cleanly. But the latent quality that attracts Magor to certain objects becomes a metaphorical point of engagement with her written work. Cleaving away from critical theory to cleave to criticality, Magor uses phenomenological experience and investigations of loss/lacking/failure to validate the shortcomings inherent in all artistic processing and works of writing. As much as we, as subjects, continually have the power to inflict change on what surrounds us, we are reciprocally impacted by that change. We may not be able to portend all its residual effects, but nonetheless continue to seek the latent in the familiar in search of a point of understanding.

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Liz Magor, “Comment with Regard to the Sculptural Work *Cupped*,” 320.

Liz Magor, *Leather Palm*, 2015–2019, polymerized gypsum, copper, cigarette, 8 × 25 × 11 cm. Photo by Rachel Topham Photography. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

